
Shifting Sights: Adapting Central American Security Structures to 21st Century Threats

By

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Introduction

I would like to address the relationship between the process of integration in Central America and the security framework and structures in the Central America region. There is a growing consensus in Central America that each state stands to gain from increasing collaboration and cooperation. The end of the Cold War and its polarizing influences within and between Central American nations, as well the general recognition of the wealth creating power of open societies, market liberalization, and trade, have given rise to a climate ripe for dramatic progress in reforming and reconfiguring Central American security structures and institutions.

The leaders of Central America have taken some initial, but bold steps toward this end. Presidents Bolanos, Maduro, Flores, Pacheco, and Portillo have each made important contributions to this process. President Bush had the opportunity to congratulate the five Central American Presidents on their progress towards an isthmus of peace and prosperity when he met with them in Washington in April.

Their commitment to the integration process is reflected in the negotiations towards a U.S.-Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). The CAFTA represents the common aspirations and goals of all our citizens. It will allow the Central American democracies to put their economic assets to more efficient use, attract more capital, and, ultimately, devote greater resources to development education, health care, and other pressing social needs. The Bush Administration is committed to bringing the CAFTA negotiations to fruition because we believe CAFTA will be a powerful force for growth and prosperity in the region.

U.S. foreign assistance programs also are being retooled to complement the forces for reform unleashed by free trade and the region's democratic evolution. Under the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA), good governance criteria are designed to support and encourage the efforts of Central American leaders thus far and provide incentives for continuing political and social reforms.

One of the hallmarks of good governance is the rational allocation of national resources. As times have changed for the better and we have seen a welcomed decrease in military spending throughout the region. Nevertheless, there is no question that the Central American states would benefit from even lower levels of spending and from further reform of security institutions, including the military.

The security structures and institutions of Central America were and largely remain organized and equipped to fight yesterday's wars and confront yesterday's challenges. With increasing economic integration and the recent success of peaceful mechanisms to resolve disputes between states in the region, defending against or deterring invasion by a neighboring state can no longer be rationally supported as the *raison d'être* of Central America's militaries. Further, there is no global struggle between superpowers for which the region might serve as a battlefield. And stable representative democracies do not require disproportionately large standing armies or security forces to impose control on their populations.

There are clear and present dangers to national security, sovereignty, and public safety in Central America. Transnational criminal networks of terrorists, narcotics and arms traffickers,

alien smugglers, and traffickers in people, are the enemy today. Their corrupting influence and destructive power should not be underestimated. Today's enemies are truly stateless. They respect no national sovereignty and, to them, a border is only something to hide behind.

Central America also is a region disproportionately plagued by natural disasters; security institutions could play a more active role in emergency preparedness and response. To meet these challenges, Central American security institutions, including the region's militaries and civilian decision-making structures, must be transformed into more agile, potent, and well-trained professional entities.

Central American states must also commit themselves to greater cooperation and coordination to combat those enemies who have successfully exploited the gaps and failures of communication among the region's security organizations. To achieve these goals, we must continue to build trust and mutual confidence between the region's governments and their security institutions. We also must be mindful of the political realities in each country and the fact that such reforms entail dislocations that must not be allowed to contribute to instability.

Security Integration to Date

We have a strong foundation to build upon. The *Framework Treaty on Democratic Security in Central America* was signed December 15, 1995 in San Pedro Sula by the Presidents of Costa Rica, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Panama. From that time, the Central American Integration system known as SICA has promoted communication and cooperation between militaries and law enforcement agencies in the sub-region. We were pleased when Belize joined SICA in 2001.

This framework for cooperation has achieved several notable successes, including the Regional Coordination Mechanism of Mutual Assistance in Disasters, the Regional Program Against Organized Crime, and the Central American Program of Integral Cooperation to Prevent and Counteract Terrorism and Linked Activities.

With the Pochomil Declaration of March 30, 2001, the Presidents of El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua agreed to undertake important confidence and security building measures and to establish a reasonable balance of forces.

Another significant step occurred on February 19, 2003 when the Central American foreign ministers ratified a model format for providing each other with information about the composition, armaments, and equipment of their military and police forces. When this initiative is fully implemented, it will help dispel distrust between neighbors and reinforce peace on the isthmus.

The Way Forward

These measures and agreements are solid and commendable achievements. They represent a promise to future generations of Central Americans, a promise of enduring peace and a reorientation of national priorities to meet dire social needs. The confluence of the ongoing CAFTA negotiations, the forthcoming MCA program, and the broadening of constructive relations between states in the region constitute an historic opportunity that must be seized.

To truly seize this opportunity, the Central American states should explicitly declare what is evident to all: That there is no reasonable justification for military action by one Central American democracy against another. It is imperative that the Central American democracies recognize that the most pressing national security threats are not each other, but rather the non-state actors represented largely by criminal mafias.

Adoption of a treaty of friendship and non-aggression by the democracies of Central America would formalize a regional security relationship that reinforces the economic framework being pursued through the Central American common market and CAFTA. Further, an agreement to restructure the region's security institutions and to coordinate their efforts to meet today's national security challenges would be the natural complement to such an undertaking.

Implementation of such agreements should entail redefining the roles and missions of Central America's security entities, including armed forces. Instead of wasting resources on obsolete conventional formations, Central American democracies need to equip and deploy forces capable of defending their country from terrorists; capable of working with neighboring and allied forces to secure the region from stateless enemies and transnational criminal networks; and capable of working to ameliorate the dislocation and destruction caused by natural disasters. These challenges can only be effectively addressed by lighter, more mobile professional forces specifically equipped and trained to perform these tasks and directed by knowledgeable civilian leadership.

Presently, Central America is the repository of an excessive supply of small arms and light weapons and any number of out-moded weapon systems or weapons systems of little, if any, use against current threats. For instance, man-portable air defense systems (MANPADs) also known as surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) or jet fighter aircraft are ineffective in combating transnational criminal organizations be they drug traffickers or alien smugglers mafias whose growing presence threatens not only the average Central American's personal security on a daily basis, but also the legitimacy of governmental and electoral processes and institutions. Excessive quantities of small arms and light weapons, and other deadly portable weapons such as MANPADs, could easily be used by the enemies of democracy to devastating effect.

These armaments were intended to fight off an invasion, or support one, to arm a faction within the state, or wage a guerrilla war or a counter-insurgency. The chances of any of those scenarios becoming reality are, as I mentioned earlier, not likely. I can confidently tell you that the United States would not tolerate them. It is much more likely that these arms might fall into the hands of terrorists or other enemies. Therefore while they exist, they represent a threat to the peoples of Central America, as well as to the Western Hemisphere as a whole.

The practical way to achieve more security while lowering military spending and putting the dividends of peace to constructive purposes, is for Central American leaders from the Presidents, their senior Ministers, and deputies in the respective National Assemblies, to opinion leaders to recognize that the threats they face are transnational in nature and require that their security forces work together, sharing the responsibilities of protecting the region.

Closer Coordination Among Their Air, Land, and Sea Components is Necessary.

Aside from restructuring and improving regional cooperation, savings can be made by eliminating the waste, fraud, and abuse in the region's military institutions. We know that there are some units that exist only on paper. Scarce funds should be put to use to address the national security threats for which they were appropriated.

In the short term, some of these savings could be allocated to appropriately equip and train new units. Some funds could ease the transition to the civilian economy of those soldiers demobilized due to reductions in force and those veterans who never made that transition. In the longer term, savings could be invested to meet national and human needs.

Conclusion

Central America has made great progress. Twenty years ago, thousands of people were dying in the region's conflicts each year. Arms were flooding in from all over the world. International enmity and internal strife were the order of the day. Peace and democracy were fervently sought after but seemingly distant. Some even speculated that World War III might begin on the isthmus.

Today, we are working toward a regional free trade agreement that includes the United States. Throughout Central America, political power flows from the ballot box, not the barrel of a gun. And Central American countries are valuable partners not only in inter-American efforts to combat threats to the region, but also specifically in the global war on terrorism.

All of us need to recognize and adapt to change. We ought not hold on to the nightmares of yesterday or spend our time and efforts trying to manage risks that no longer exist. There are plenty of real and immediate threats out there that demand our attention.

The United States is committed to helping our friends and neighbors. We want our democratic partners in this hemisphere to enjoy peace and prosperity for its own sake and because it is clearly in our best interest that they do so. We are ready to be of assistance in any way practical. But we also know that only by doing the difficult work themselves of hammering out and implementing agreements, restructuring forces, retraining and re-equipping personnel, redeploying unit, coordinating efforts, eliminating corruption and dangerous stockpiles of weapons, and lowering military spending, can the Central American democracies secure the foundation of peace they have sacrificed so much for, and on that foundation build a better future for succeeding generations.